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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the phenomenon of underachievement of students. Underachievement is characterized by a significant discrepancy between the student's performance and potential. After considering some of the common causes for underachievement and the typical problems of underachievers, the rest of the paper discusses six methods of intervention that can empower elementary and high school teachers and parents to address the problems and needs of underachievers. The first method, "The Power to Stop Accepting Failure," suggests using after-school study sessions and notifying parents of the situation and their role in it. The second, "The Power to Relate Attitudes, Behaviors, and Consequences," seeks to demonstrate to students that consequences are an outcome of their attitudes and behaviors, and therefore under their control. The third method, "The Power to Use Logical, Reasonable, and Consistent Consequences," stresses the importance of delineating the consequences for acceptable and unacceptable behavior related to achievement. The next method, "The Power to Teach Metacognitive Skills," suggests assisting underachievers to organize study time and monitor and evaluate progress. "The Power to be Creative and Use Cooperative Learning" impresses the need for involving students creatively and cooperatively in the learning process. The final method, "The Power to Mentor," emphasizes the need for teachers to assume roles of counselors and mentors to motivate the underachievers. Concluding comments focus on the relationship between academic and social success, and the role of both teachers and parents in dealing with underachievement. (BAC)

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Parent-Teacher Empowerment: Meeting the Needs of Underachieving Students

CAROLYN C. GHAVAM

Are you satisfied with the achievement of your students or your children? Do you have a high or even small number of students who are failing each year in your school? Nearly 30 years ago, Fine (1967) reported that "one of every four youngsters... is in serious trouble - is a year and a half or more below his(her) grade level, and is losing more ground each time he(she) is promoted." (p. 11). Today, this statistic is probably much higher because of the cultural diversity in the schools. In order to understand this phenomenon called underachievement, let's look at some of its characteristics and causes.

Underachievement Defined

Butler-Por (1987) defines underachievement "...as a large discrepancy between the child's school performance and some manifestation of the child's true ability such as teachers' and parents' observations or achievement, creativity, and intelligence measures." (p. 6). The author further reports that "most studies define underachievers by the large gap between the underachiever's school performance and potential." (p. 6). Potential is usually based on IQ

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measures while achievement is based on teacher's grades or achievement tests.

But who are these underachievers? Brown (1990) suggests that "the failure to achieve academically at levels commensurate with potential by students who are racially, ethnically, and economically different from mainstreamed Americans is a well-documented reality." (p. 305). While Brown suggests that disadvantaged students tend to be underachievers, Quinn (1991) reports that the problem is not limited to children of lower socioeconomic status or to children living in large urban areas. "On the contrary," he says, "the problem is national and cuts across racial, ethnic, and geographical lines." (p. 74). Because underachievers come from diverse backgrounds and cultural ecologies, let's explore the commonalities that characterize them as underachievers.

Causal Factors of Underachievement

There are many factors that cause underachievement. Brown (1990) and Kelly and Kelly (1991) believe that the causes of underachievement include a lack of achievement motivation and parental support. Brown (1990) further states that single-parent households, teen pregnancies, poor self-concept, and truancy cause underachievement. These findings suggest the need to intervene in the familial setting by counseling and motivating parents to help

their children academically succeed. They also imply the need for a curriculum that will build the self-esteem and confidence of underachievers.

Raph et al. (1966) argued that causative factors of underachievement included home and family relationships, socioeconomic backgrounds, educational and cultural levels of families, and achievement motivation. This indicates the need for schools and teachers to do more than perfunctory activities with families. We must get more involved with the problems that families are experiencing in helping their children excel in school. And families of gifted students are also experiencing difficulty. Grau (1985) attributed academic failure of gifted underachievers to poor childrearing practices, poor family interactions, social immaturity, and poor decision making. The message is clear that we must work more closely with families of underachieving students.

In addition to the many causes of underachievement, parents and teachers face many problems when dealing with underachievers. Characteristic problems of underachievers include: a short attention span, boredom, restlessness, defensiveness, immature value orientations, negativistic attitude, poor study habits, poor metacognitive abilities, rebellion, and poor self-confidence. (Fine 1967, Butler-Por 1987, Biehler and Snowman 1990). The research is replete on the causes and characteristics of underachieving students and it supports the need to intervene in the home and the school.

Since educators are primarily responsible for getting underachievers to achieve, there is a need to know some interventions that may help them to address this national crisis. Teachers have the power to work miracles in the lives of the students they serve, but it may call for a change in attitude, perspective, and instructional practices. We need to see ourselves as capable of making a difference - capable of making a miracle in a student's life.

The suggestions in this presentation are generic for elementary and high school teachers. They call for teachers to become more involved with the affective and psychosocial needs of their students in the home and in the classroom. They call for teachers to take on some of the roles of counseling parents and using their background in child development to support parents in a quest to turn underachievement into achievement. Since underachievers experience social, emotional, and academic problems, teachers and parents must devise methods that address these needs.

The Power to Stop Accepting Failure

All too often, the scenario goes like this: a student gets a D or an F; the teacher records the grade; the teacher then moves on to the next academic

objective. No intervention occurs to see if the student, given more time and different activities, can master the concept(s). This is helping students to accept failure. And a C or B can be less than best effort. Teachers must take the time to get students to reach beyond the ordinary and mediocre.

Many times teachers don't feel that they have time to reteach a concept but reteaching may be called for if we truly want all students to reach their optimal potential. After-school study sessions may work wonders for the teacher with little class time to spare to work with underachievers. It will enable the teacher to tune in on weaknesses, such as, reading, writing, study strategies, and study habits. All of these can be discussed in one-on-one counseling sessions. Such sessions will send a clear message to the student that you care and have high academic expectations for them - that you refuse to ignore their lack of achievement. After-school study sessions can greatly improve teacher-student rapport and motivate the student to try harder. And sessions should be therapeutic and not punitive in nature. Sessions should simply be to help the student do his/her best.

Parent notification of less than best performance is another way to stop accepting failure. Once a month notification loses too much valuable time that could have been spent on remediation. Parents should be telephoned or sent progress reports at least twice a month. Ideally, parents would be notified as

soon as a student makes a less than best performance grade so that they could begin immediately to work on the related skill or concept. But parents won't know what to do unless the teacher tells them. Remedial work, extra practice assignments, or worksheets can be sent along with the progress reports. The progress reports should be signed by the parent and followed up with a telephone call. Unless teachers have a large number of underachievers in their class(es), they should not have too many telephone calls to make. The personal touch will go a long way toward increasing credibility as a caring professional. It can be used to encourage parents to also stop accepting failure.

Parents can take an active interest in the academic activities of the underachiever. Some parents must be encouraged to praise the accomplishments of the student rather than always criticizing the failures. Progress reports that tell parents about good conduct, social and academic goals, as well as, grades give parents things to praise. Some parents have given up on the student. They should be encouraged to set high expectations around the house for homework, studying in general, and for chores. Let them know that students can review classwork daily even when there is no homework. Let parents know that they can expect the student to explain study notes to them at least twice a week. Most importantly, tell parents that their youngster has "great potential"

because if you believe it, the parents will believe it. If the parents believe it, it may spill over to the student. These suggestions will help the student with low achievement motivation and poor self-concept.

The Power to Relate Attitudes, Behaviors and Consequences

Underachievers are known to have negativistic, self-deprecating attitudes and behaviors. Some do not respect authority. (Eg., Fine, 1967). One of the areas that needs teacher and parent intervention then is attitudes and behaviors. Students need to know that Attitudes + Behaviors = Consequences and they are responsible for those consequences.

Class discussions on attitudes and related behaviors can grab the underachiever's interest if they focus on real-life, immediate concerns, e.g., teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, dating, job seeking, interview skills, etc. As a starter, the class can divide into groups of four or five or simply brainstorm appropriate topics. Discussion can focus on the importance of having positive and optimistic attitudes and behaviors; when caution is warranted; how attitudes cause behaviors; and, how behaviors cause certain outcomes or consequences. Students must be shown that they have control over outcomes.

Role-playing various problematic situations or relevant issues is another way to modify and heighten certain attitudes and behaviors. Often,

underachievers have an "I can't" or "I won't" attitude. Discuss the reality of these attitudes, how they hinder growth and maturity. Put the students into reality-based situations during class time and get them to try an "I can" and an "I will" attitude to see how it feels.

Some students are afraid of failure or success. To get at the fears, discuss the relationship between effort and outcome. Let them know that they are in the driver's seat. No one can drive their car except themselves. Ask them, "Do you really want to keep having accidents? " Tell them, "Every time you get a failing grade, it's saying that you don't know how to drive your own car. It's like running into a brick wall again and again." Explore more situations like this one through situational analyses and group discussions. Motivate the entire class to give their best effort and to strive for academic competence. This will help the student who is afraid of getting good grades because other students might shy away from him/her. In motivating students, we must set the climate as a "mistake-making environment". Let students know that mistakes mean growth because the minute you admit that you don't understand something or get an incorrect answer, you're on the rode to getting the correct answer.

Parents need to work on attitudes and behaviors, too. Teachers can encourage parents to be more authoritative, warm, friendly, and to explain the

reasons behind the rules to the student. Students need to be shown respect if the parents expect them to give it. Parents may need to realize this.

Parents can also be encouraged to clarify each family member's role and responsibility during a family meeting. This would be a good time to discuss expectations for wanting to help around the house and for wanting to achieve. It's also a good time to impress upon the student that their behavior needs to be positive and supportive - not antagonistic or hostile. Parents can also discuss the effects that certain negativistic attitudes and behaviors have on the entire family and achievement. As parents and teachers help underachievers to adopt more positive and healthy attitudes and behaviors, the student can experience more positive and healthy consequences. Showing the relationship between attitudes, behaviors and consequences in situational analyses, role-playing, and family and class discussions will give underachievers a support system through which the student can affect changes. These suggestions will help the student with negativistic, self-deprecating attitudes and behaviors.

The Power to Use Logical, Reasonable, and Consistent Consequences

Once roles and responsibilities, and the effects of attitudes and behaviors have been clarified, parents and teachers need to clearly delineate the consequences for acceptable and unacceptable behavior. What teachers tend to do is to list class rules and the consequences for negative behaviors. Too often, we fail to reward the positive behaviors. An effective relationship needs a balance of both kinds of consequences.

Among the charts hanging on the wall should be one for social and academic goals. Parents and teachers can use this chart to record progress that students make accomplishing immediate (weekly) goals. Another chart might depict intermediate or more long-range goals. This is a positive way to get students to focus on outcomes and consequences for desirable behavior. Stars can be placed next to each goal attained on a weekly basis. If half of the goals are reached, a special reward can be given. Let the student decide what the reward should be as long as it's within reason and practical.

Give public recognition to those students who reach their goal and help them set a new goal for the next week. Talk privately with those who did not reach their goal to determine why. An example of social goals might be: To help two students with their homework this week or to study with a study partner at least twice this week. Academic goals might be: to get a B on my next social

studies' test or to improve by one letter grade on my next math assignment.

But what about the student who still refuses to do classwork? We can start by evaluating the interest appeal of the subject matter. Does it relate to the real world or to the student's world? Have the students had input into lesson plans and the curriculum? Do students offer alternatives to class and homework assignments? If the answer is yes to these questions, then it's time to evaluate the message you send to students who do not participate in class.

One of the consequences for students who do not complete class or homework assignments can be an after-school study session. Explain it as a consequence of their poor performance - an effort to help the student achieve rather than as a punishment. E.g., " Young ladies and gentlemen, I need you to give me your best so we will take extra time after school to work together on these assignments." Students will be less resentful if they feel we have their best interest at heart instead of being punished. It all depends upon how we phrase our comments.

The principal should initially approve an after-school policy and parents should be notified ahead of time if they pick up students from school of if students ride a school bus. It's also a good idea to make this policy known

during a telephone conference with all parents at the beginning of the school year.

In addition to working on deficient skill areas, after-school study sessions can be used to discuss study strategies and study habits. Some study strategies might include: outlining the chapter of texts, answering the questions at the end of chapters, diagramming class and study notes, making flash cards of key concepts and terms, or student-made exams to test recall. Some study habits might include: having a quiet place to study each day, having a routine study time, getting snacks and beverages before studying, and finishing assignments. Generally, there just isn't enough time during the regular instructional day to get to know students as personally as one might like. After-school study sessions have the potential for developing diagnostic and prescriptive strategies that help to better individualize instruction and thereby help the underachiever experience success in the academic environment.

Parents also need to use logical, reasonable, and consistent consequences. They need to be reminded to praise or recognize the student's accomplishments. Some parents use money to do this. Others simply use praise, a hug, a pat on the back, an announcement over the dinner table, or

privileges. Either way, the teacher and parent must work together to change the negative interactions and patterns for underachievers.

Not turning in homework and classwork are common problems of the underachiever. In addition to after-school study sessions, parents can be urged to have the student spend quality time reviewing class and study notes after they get home. Parents should set some realistic limits to the student's behavior regarding studying. Parents should also know that it's their right and responsibility to limit telephone calls, television, radio, and social interactions before quality time is spent studying. Parents will support efforts to help their child achieve when given specific consequences that make sense and are easy to enforce. Also, teachers can offer some specific suggestions as to what constitutes quality time. In other words, parents need to know about good study strategies. Parents need specifics. These suggestions will help students with undesirable behaviors and poor study strategies and habits.

The Power to Teach Metacognitive Skills

Underachievers can have poor metacognitive skills. They may not know how to think about their thinking. (Eg., Biehler and Snowman, 1990). Teachers can teach them to make organized plans for studying and social functions. Many underachievers are impulsive. This will help them to focus on concrete, attainable goals. This requires daily effort but it only requires a matter of seconds. Students need to plan study time and leisure time. As we help underachievers develop and carry out plans, we will also need to help them organize their time.

Time management is another weak skill that underachievers need to strengthen so they need to prepare a weekly plan with time parameters. Teachers can assign a study partner who will telephone the underachiever to remind them to stay on task and to help with any subject matter problems. Make the relationship one of give and take; the underachiever should be responsible for calling the study partner and discussing homework assignments and study techniques as well. By giving students planning and organization skills, we help them to become more independent and self-directed in terms of academic pursuits. But don't limit plans and organization to academics, let students plan

social interactions and special events, as well as, organizing their notebooks and study notes to increase their competence in these skill areas.

Other metacognitive skills that underachievers may not possess are monitoring and evaluating progress. Underachievers may have problems conceptualizing just how well or poorly they are doing academically. That's why teachers need to give performance reports as grades occur. It only takes minutes but the effect can go a long way in helping the underachiever to face the reality of his/her situation. Students should be encouraged to record their performance in a safe place and to share progress with parents. Periodic progress reports will help students determine if they are using adequate study time or strategies and permit them to take charge of their achievements.

Parents should be informed that teachers are helping students to plan, organize, monitor and evaluate progress. Parent support should be solicited. Parents can remind students to refer to plans or schedules and to stay on task when studying. Parents should also acknowledge the student's effort to take more responsibility for his/her education.

In terms of organizing notes, and monitoring and evaluating progress, parents can show an interest in the student. Parents can let the student read and explain study notes to them on a daily basis if possible. If the parent doesn't understand something in the notes, they can ask probing questions of

the student. This will help the student internalize the subject content. Parents should also ask to see grade reports on class and homework assignments and tests periodically and should focus on the growth of the student and not on the grade. When dealing with underachievers, it's important to focus on progress and processes that reflect the student's real steps toward success.

Sometimes poor organizational skills affect how well the underachiever is able to store information in long-term memory. Biehler and Snowman (1990) tell us that organization and meaningfulness aid long-term memory. It is reasonable then to give the underachiever strategies that will aid memory retention. Mnemonic devices are a good technique to introduce to students. They are also fun and enjoyable. Teaching students to break information up into small, related chunks of information when memorizing is also helpful. Teaching them to associate or relate the new information to existing information makes learning more meaningful. Teaching them to make outlines, flowcharts, summaries, and graphs helps them review and recall information. Students should share these with their parents. These suggestions will help students with poor metacognitive skills and poor study habits and strategies. They will also promote independent and self-directed academic behaviors and attitudes.

The Power to be Creative and Use Cooperative Learning

Underachievers need our creativity. Assignments and class discussions that relate to the real world can show students how to apply their knowledge in real life situations. We must challenge students' imaginations by getting them to create. We must also impress upon students the importance of thinking and problem-solving skills and get them to relate these skills to their own world. Teachers have the power to be creative and to get students actively involved. Another way to get students to be active rather than passive participants in education is through cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning is heterogeneous grouping. Students of varying ability levels participate in the same group. They learn from each other because each student brings unique talents to the group. Some have leadership, writing, organizing, artistic, public speaking and a variety of other skills. By alternating responsibilities, students have an opportunity to put these talents to work. Cooperative learning meets the social and academic needs of the underachiever.

Cooperative learning helps the underachiever's need for survival, acceptance, power, freedom, and fun. When the students interact on a social basis, they get more engrossed in the academic content. Cooperative groups also

lend themselves to more creative assignments instead of the mundane lecture approach. This often builds a positive classroom climate, increases productivity, and decreases discipline problems. (Foyle and Lyman, 1991). Most importantly, cooperative learning increases student motivation because of personal interactions and peer pressure to work cohesively in the group.

Teachers can also be more creative in their approach to academic content by teaching higher level thinking skills. We must challenge underachievers to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. We can also use more open-ended questioning instead of the more common "yes" or "no" questions and call upon students to reflect about their opinions, answers, thinking, and to make judgments about the logic or feasibility of their responses. These suggestions will help students who have a short attention span, are bored or restless, the one who procrastinates or daydreams, and the one who feels like a second class citizen.

The Power to Mentor

All of the suggestions thus far cited call for the teacher or parent to interact and to communicate more positively with the underachieving student. How teachers present themselves - the role they chose to play - will greatly determine how well the underachiever opens up and responds to efforts of intervention. Students need someone they can look up to as a role model and as a

confidant. They need someone with whom they can share their aspirations, fears, dreams, and goals. That's why it's also important for teachers to take on the role of becoming mentors.

Teachers can become counselors who care about the student's needs, anxieties, emotions, and personal problems. After-school sessions should also become a time of getting to know the student's home situation and peer relationships so that the teacher can also intervene in these areas. Finding out what motivates the underachiever to give less than best performance is the key. We must encourage them to be "better than best." E.g., If six people are selected for an interview for the same job at a fast food restaurant, they were the best candidates. To get the job, impress upon the student the need to be better than the best. Only one person will get the job. Discussions like these, using meaningful situational analysis, may motivate the underachiever to give better performance.

Mentoring relationships can help uncover specific, negative attitudes and behavior patterns that cause the student to underachieve. Some underachievers want to be "part of the in-crowd." The in-crowd is underachieving so the student imitates his/her peer group. A mentoring relationship can discuss the realities of always following a destructive pattern of behavior; the realities of failure; the realities of not being able to buy a car because of not finding a high enough paying

job. The teacher as mentor can encourage the underachiever to make friends with students who respect academic pursuit and who are also popular. As mentioned earlier, this can be done with study partners and through cooperative learning groups.

When talking privately with the underachiever, the teacher as mentor takes on the role of being a motivator: encouraging the underachiever to take charge of his/her life and activities; encouraging them to see themselves as unique and special, capable of contributing to society and making a real difference in the world; and, building up their self-esteem by getting them to see the beauty in themselves. We do this buy defining their strong and positive characteristics. Many times, underachievers have a history of negative interactions with and comments by teachers. If we change this negative pattern in their lives, we put them on a rode that holds better options for future success.

Conclusion

Teachers and parents must tune in to the underachiever to identify their talents, strengths, unique skills, fears, anxieties, and aspirations. The underachiever must be convinced that they have the capabilities for academic achievements. This requires extra effort - going that extra mile to be a miracle maker. The underachiever also has to be motivated to put forth extra effort in

the classroom and at home. They are not going to do this until they know that they have a support system that will help them put forth the appropriate study strategies and effort that will indeed produce better academic outcomes. Teachers and parents have to become the cooperating support system.

Getting students to academically succeed means giving them success socially and academically. You can't resolve the negative academic pattern without social interventions. The two are too strongly interrelated. Teachers can present activities and promote goals that are challenging but within reach. They can present creative assignments through cooperative learning that will motivate the underachiever to actively participate. Success is intrinsically rewarding but it's up to teachers to give students those first tastes of success and then to keep it coming.

The suggestions shared in this article are just a few ways that teachers and parents can motivate students to learn. Teachers and parents must become accountable for the failure as they are for the successes of these students. Too many students are not reaching their full academic potential. It's time for teachers to utilize their professional and personal power to reach out to underachieving students and their families. It's time for families to reach out to teachers and encourage better interventions for the underachiever. With just a

change in focus, structure, and communication practices, teachers and parents can motivate the underachiever to achieve.

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